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# ‘That’s where my perception of it all was shattered’: Oral histories and moral geographies of food sector workers in an English city region



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## ABSTRACT

Geographers and oral historians continue to have much to learn from each other. The subfield of labour geography in particular can enrich its understanding of workers’ lived experiences, both in employment and beyond the workplace, through greater use of interpretative, collaborative oral history methodologies. Attentive to the temporal specificity and inter-subjectivity of people’s narratives, oral history reveals how workers’ moral geographies emerge and change. This article documents the spatio-temporalities and institutions of food sector employment in Peterborough, England, a city-region from which urban-based workers are bussed out daily to rural jobs. The analysis draws on four extended case studies of people who migrated to the UK and worked in the sector in the 2000s, building on recent research that has highlighted harsh employment conditions in the food production, packing and processing sector. It complements this work by viewing narrative itself as an agentic act and listening to how research participants crafted their life stories. These stories revealed diverse, complex and context-specific moral geographies, with participants variously placing value on small acts of rebellion or refusal, dignity and the time to speak with others at work. The article advocates greater engagement by labour geographers with the subjective experiences of workers, and with individual as well as collective agency.

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Capitalists... want labour power: they want a factor of production. What they get are people (Mitchell, 2012: 73)

Oral history is a history built around people (Thompson, 1988: 28)

## 1. Introduction

Working conditions in UK food processing, as well as in growing and packing fresh produce, have intensified with the concentration of supermarket buying power since the latter part of last century (Rogaly, 2008). People working in the food sector have long been employed on a contingent, informal basis across the diverse geographies of agrarian capitalism (Reid-Musson, 2014: 164). However, the recent intensification of workplace regimes in the food sector coincides with ascendant neoliberalism and ‘worsening conditions... for the majority of workers worldwide’ (Coe, 2013: 279). This is, at first glance, a surprising context for labour

geography, premised – as its canonical texts were – on critiquing approaches to economic geography that made little or no allowance for workers’ power to influence the spaces in which they lived and worked (Herod, 1997, 2001).

Early works in labour geography have rightly been criticized for being overoptimistic regarding the potential for workers to shape landscapes of capitalism (Lier, 2007: 829; Peck, 2013: 110). More recently the sub-field expanded its focus to include the diminishing power of labour in relation to capital across several sectoral and geographical contexts (see, for example, Bergene et al., 2010; Smith, 2014; Warren, 2014; Waite et al., 2015). Agency remained relevant to these new accounts, but, in terms of Cindi Katz’s typology, more in terms of ‘resilience’ than the stronger ‘reworking’ or the more transformative ‘resistance’ varieties (Katz, 2004). Importantly workers’ agency has been shown to take diverse forms, not necessarily involving the workplace, and including reactionary as well as progressive politics (Ince et al., 2015; Featherstone and Griffin, 2015).

With important exceptions such as the work of Warren (2014), Ince et al. (2015) and McDowell (2005, 2013), this expanded labour geography contains very little of the voices of workers themselves. It seems ironic that in a subfield that originated as a committed project of the Left, more attention is given to fellow scholars’

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academic productions, organizational perspectives, and governmental, employers' and union archives than to the experiences of workers as they themselves saw them.<sup>1</sup> Notwithstanding important work by feminist geographers emphasizing the 'complexity of workers as social beings' (Warren, 2014: 2300; and see McDowell, 2008; Pratt, 2012; Buckley, 2014), this absence contributes to a more general lack of grounded engagement with workers' lived experiences in labour geography (Kelly, 2012: 431–2), which remains evident in a recent restatement of the 'central tenets' of the subfield (Herod, 2014). It also exacerbates what Castree has portrayed as an insufficient focus by labour geographers on workers' moral geographies – 'sets of values relating to modes of conduct – potential and actual – towards other people, near and far' (2010: 468–9; see also Philo, 1991). Prompted by Castree, this article moves away from the wider focus of geographers writing on professional and academic moralities, geographical sensitivity to ethical practices (O Tuathail, 1996; Smith, 2000) or human–environment relations (Matless, 1994). Instead, like Gough, whose subject is also workers' agency, we are more interested in 'the moralities of the majority' than in those of 'an enlightened social-democratic elite' (2010: 132).<sup>2</sup>

The article draws on the methodological and theoretical resources of oral history as one means of addressing the need for more attention in labour geography to lived experience and to workers' moral geographies, with particular focus on the oral histories of international migrant workers who have tended to be portrayed in popular discourse as either villains (taking jobs from UK nationals) or voiceless victims of the employment regimes of the UK's food sector. This is part of a move away from a labour geography that is confined to seeking out all-too-rare examples of workers' victorious actions in relation to capital. *Contra* some critiques of a focus on workers' agency *per se* (Scott, 2013b: 709), we do not seek to celebrate that agency and thereby somehow obscure the depredations of contemporary food sector capitalism. Indeed, attending to workers' moral geographies enables us to avoid romanticizing or conceptually homogenizing workers' agency in the food sector. As with workers in other sectors (see, e.g. Ince et al., 2015), UK food sector workers have sometimes excluded or discriminated against others in the workplace 'through (often unspoken) employment cultures' (Gough, 2010: 133).

We use four extended case studies developed from repeated oral history interviews and interactions about a specific sector, place and time: the industrialized food and agriculture sector in the Peterborough city region of the UK in the 2000s. International migrant workers have come to have a central role in the sector (Rogaly, 2008; Scott, 2013a). As with the work of Mitchell (1996, 2012) and McDowell (e.g. 2008, 2013), therefore, the article speaks to another of Castree's critiques of labour geography, that 'the study of labour migrants... has tended to be undertaken by others... If one looks at existing exemplar texts in labour geography... migration barely warrants a mention' (2007: 858–9).

<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this article we focus on self-defined labour geography, referred to by Peck (accepted for publication: 3) as 'Labor Geography proper', which, as this opening section shows, expanded out from initial work by Herod (1997, 2001). This project sits within a larger 'small-l labor geography'. Peck goes on to identify 'a cumulatively-assembled palimpsest of analytical sensibilities and practices' to work, labour and employment in Anglo-American economic geography since the 1970s. However, his review of this body of work makes no mention of either oral history or moral geographies.

<sup>2</sup> Cresswell (2005: 128) refers to moral geographies as sets of rules by which 'certain people, things and practices belong in certain spaces, places and landscapes and not in others'. Like him, we are concerned with 'the role of power in constituting the relationship between geography on the ground and the practices of social groups and individuals'. But here, our concern is to show how oral history can be an important means of understanding ways in which workers' diverse and complex values regarding conduct in food sector workplaces are produced by the sector's unequal power relations and specific geographies.

Our study complements the growing body of research on the impact of structural changes in the food supply chain on contemporary employment regimes in the UK (Rogaly, 2008; Strauss, 2012; Scott, 2013a,b; Findlay and McCollum, 2013). Demographic changes in Britain's food sector workforce during the 2000s, the growing importance of packing and distribution work servicing supermarket requirements, and the ways in which capital continues to accumulate surplus in the sector in particular regional and national contexts (Thomas, 1985; Guthman, 2004), are abundantly evidenced by the narratives of workers and former workers in the food sector in the Peterborough city-region. However, our study differs from existing work on labour's geography (Smith, 2014: 6) in the food sector as our use of oral history enables us to explore *subjective* experiences of this employment, and its location within varied life trajectories, as they are glimpsed in collaborative interviews. This reveals complex, varied and context-specific moral geographies of food sector employment, including a valuing of dignity in relation to supervisors and fellow workers, time for workplace interaction, small acts of rebellion and refusal, and longer-term transformations in people's sense of justice.

We thus respond to the tendency of labour geography, as a self-defined field, to '[fail] to put 'working people' at the center of the analysis' (Mitchell, 2005: 96). The word 'people' is important here, as it avoids reducing the subjects of such research to the occupation they may have had at a particular point in time. Indeed, we seek to respond to Castree's call for a labour geography that analyzes the geographies of employment and labour struggle 'not in themselves but as windows onto the wider question of how people live and seek to live' (2007: 860, author's emphasis). Oral history fits well with this agenda, we argue, involving as it does the co-production of extended case studies of 'people', with multifaceted lives, identities, geographies and histories that provided a context for the food sector work they did.

The rest of the article proceeds as follows. In the next section we introduce the spatial, temporal and sectoral context of our study, noting the importance of international migrant workers in food production, processing and packing in the Peterborough city region. The third section explains the oral history methods we used, before we go on in section four to elaborate the four extended case studies. In section five we discuss what the four cases taken together reveal about current and former food sector workers' subjectivities and moral geographies. Section six concludes by returning to the core issues raised in the article concerning the use of oral history in labour geography.

## 2. A labour hub in the English Fens

The eastern edge of Peterborough abuts the westernmost portion of the Fens, an industrialized rural region for which food processing has been identified as 'fundamental' (Green et al., 2009: 1271). In the mid-2000s, the Fens were the site of a major concentration of national agricultural and horticultural production with 4000 farms accounting for 24 per cent of all potatoes, 37 per cent of the field vegetables and 28 per cent of the bulbs grown in England, and employing 17,500 people (National Farmers Union, 2008: 1, 3, 5 and 9).

Since the 1990s, there has been an increasing reliance of farms and food packing and processing companies in the Fens, and also nationally, on international migrant workers. One estimate based on analysis of official data on the registration of EU accession country nationals between 2004 and 2010 found that they accounted for 40 per cent of the agricultural workforce – a far higher ratio than in any other sector (McCollum, 2013: 36).<sup>3</sup> Evidence showed

<sup>3</sup> Food processing was not included in this calculation.

that moves made by international migrant workers complemented, rather than substituted for, British workers, who, even in the years following the post-2008 recession, had shown themselves to be reluctant to take up work under the conditions required (Findlay and McCollum, 2013: 12).<sup>4</sup>

Peterborough has long been a labour hub for the food sector in surrounding rural areas, including the Fens. Crucially it is the headquarters of a large number of employment agencies, whose businesses revolve around physically transporting people to different worksites depending on the demand for workers on the day. Stenning et al. (2006) use the term ‘city region’ for Peterborough, a term no longer commonly used in geography but one that makes sense, certainly in East Anglia, ‘as an organizing concept for spatial development policy’ (Healey, 2009: 832 and 837). This might well include policy responses to the arrival of large numbers of international migrants in cities such as Peterborough in the 2000s.

The population of Peterborough increased dramatically between 2001 (157,439) and 2011 (183,631). Much of this growth came from migration to the city by nationals of eight of the countries that acceded to the European Union (EU) in 2004, whilst there was also a significant rise in Portuguese nationals.<sup>5</sup> Earlier, in the 1950s, 60s and 70s, the city had seen the arrival of thousands of migrants from other countries, including Italy, Pakistan and Uganda. A survey of 278 more recently arrived international migrant workers undertaken in early 2008 found that over 30% gave their workplace as *outside* the city, in surrounding counties, revealing the very particular geography of this Peterborough-based food sector labour force. The report drew direct links between the growth in the number of migrant workers living in Peterborough and working conditions in agriculture and food processing, referring to ‘the segregation of new migrant workers into agriculture and food processing plants through poor pay, long hours and shift-pattern working’ (Scullion and Morris, 2009: 32).

Similar conditions were reported by two national studies of food sector employment in the early 2010s, also based on interviews with workers. Part of a wider contemporary concern with unfree labour (McGrath and Strauss, 2015), one study used community interviewers to gather testimony from 62 people across England and Scotland. The labour practices they identified bring out important aspects of recent employment experiences in the sector, including humiliating treatment by supervisors, being used ‘more as machines’ than people, and being tied-in by work permits. The material is hard-hitting, revealing the ‘psychological harm’ that workers in the sector can experience (Scott et al., 2012: 41, 42 and 65). The second national study was commissioned by the UK Equalities and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) into employment conditions in meat and poultry processing (EHRC, 2010, 2012). The study found that supermarkets operated downward pressure on meat and poultry prices, leading to reductions in labour costs. These national reports based on interviews with workers are of vital importance as sources of evidence in struggles for workplace justice. Indeed, as we describe our methodology in the next section, we explain how our own study also aimed at doing more than merely researching, especially at the urban scale.

### 3. Oral histories/working class geographies

If experience of workplace inequality and exploitation shapes people’s moral outlook (Gough, 2010: 132), reflective oral history interviews can be opportunities for such moral positions to be articulated to a wider audience, including fellow workers. We brought different Peterborough residents’ oral histories of the workplace into conversation with each other using theatre, photography, exhibitions and other events.<sup>6</sup> These conversations included residents who were apparently unfamiliar with each other because of their differing ethnicities, countries of origin and migration histories. We expected that oral history interviews would be transformative for the individual interviewers and narrators. We also hoped that they would enable greater understanding among working-class residents in the city of challenges they faced in common across ethnic and national boundaries and thus build opposition to racism and anti-immigrant sentiment. Among the important commonalities we believed might emerge were workplace experiences in the food sector.

Oral history is diverse and encompasses distinctive regional and national traditions. Nonetheless, some ‘shared social and intellectual forces’ can be identified, showing oral history’s move from a positivist approach that used ‘memory as a source for “people’s history”’ (Perks and Thomson, 2016: 1) to an interpretivist one attentive to the relation between interviewer and narrator, shared authority, co-production, and the use of oral history to achieve social change. Oral history can also contribute to more ‘temporally integrated geographies’ (Kwan, 2013) through explicit consideration of the ‘timeframe’ of research, both in terms of historical time, and time as subjectively experienced and narrated (Rogaly and Thieme, 2012). In contrast to the under-contextualised eternal present sometimes found in social science writing, an oral history narrator is understood as speaking ‘of a particular history at a particular moment to a particular person, who himself is situated in a particular history’ (Shopes, 2011: 479).

Andrews et al. argue that oral history has been relatively neglected by human geography as a whole (2006: 158), while Jackson and Russell refer to geography’s ‘relatively modest contribution to oral history research’ (2010: 188).<sup>7</sup> This is also true of the sub-field of labour geography. Major exceptions here include Gray’s (2014) collaboratively-produced oral history portrait of a non-unionised female domestic cleaner, and especially the work of Linda McDowell (2005, 2013), whose studies of international migrant women in the UK over six decades show these workers to have been active, knowing subjects both in contesting conditions of injustice and exploitation in the workplace and in challenging representations that stereotyped them.

Our approach to oral history leans towards the interpretivist – exploring the significance of how oral histories are told – and the collaborative. How and what people remember, how they talk about it, what they choose to tell and why, are key areas of analysis. At one level, there is no single objective truth but rather a bundle of renditions of past experience, recorded in particular circumstances (see Abrams, 2010). Yet we also treat oral history interviews as sources of information, believing that multiple and repeated oral history interviews yield a broad picture of how food sector jobs and their associated spatio-temporalities were experienced by workers in the city region (Rogaly and Qureshi, 2012). In this article we attempt to hold in tension these different registers of analysis that (i) provide insights into the four individuals

<sup>4</sup> This had not always been the case. Although there is a long history of migrant working in British agriculture stretching back until at least the first half of the nineteenth century (Griffin, 2013), as recently as the 1980s one trade union report was concerned about ‘the growing black economy in agricultural areas close to conurbations, where part-time British workers were threatening the jobs of farm workers by working for tax-free wages, without insurance or sick pay’ (Conford and Burchardt, 2011).

<sup>5</sup> Centre on Dynamics of Ethnicity Area Profiler, <http://www.ethnicity.ac.uk/census/>, accessed 2nd August 2013.

<sup>6</sup> See Rogaly (2016); <http://www.placesforall.co.uk>. Performing arts have increasingly been used as means to bring geographers’ research to wider audiences (see, for example, Rogers, 2012; Pratt and Johnston, 2013; Richardson, 2015).

<sup>7</sup> There are of course important exceptions, such as Blunt (2003), Lorimer (2003), Riley and Harvey (2007), Robertson (2013) and Richardson (2015).



whose stories are explored in depth, including how they wanted their story to come across, and the moral geographies associated with this, and (ii) enable us to comment on food sector work in a specific city region at a particular time.

Alessandro Portelli argues that 'the researcher's path crosses the narrator's at erratic times, and the collected life history is the result of this chance occurrence' (1991: 61). The temporal location of these four narrators as *former* insiders to some of the toughest food sector workplace regimes enables them to reflect from a distance of sorts. These are people who tell their stories looking back over time having subsequently experienced greater comfort and security than the most intensive work in the food supply chain allows. Trajectories are not linear, and seemingly more comfortable workplaces contain their own conflicts and struggles; the search for economic security and life fulfillment continues. These are unique testimonies. Moreover, food sector workers' narratives are rarely found in local or national archives.

While inter-subjectivity lies at the heart of much contemporary oral history analysis (James, 2000; Herbert, 2007; Abrams, 2010), it is relatively rarely explored by labour geographers. Yet, as other geographers of working lives operating outside the self-defined subfield of labour geography (Miles and Crush, 1993; Gray, 2014) have drawn on oral history literature to show, oral history narratives are co-created through relationships between at least two subjects – researcher and narrator – and, further, they are told in relation to contemporary cultural norms and the specific location and atmosphere of the interview. This contains its own paradox. A sense of political closeness to a narrator does not turn the researcher into an insider. There remains an inequality to the relationship (Portelli, 1991: 38). In spite of this, Portelli himself is optimistic about building equality in oral history fieldwork, which needs to be seen as based on 'encounter[s] between two subjects who recognize each other as subjects' (1991: 43). The oral history fieldwork that we have drawn on in this article brings us as researchers into the discussion through the multiple encounters we had with each of the narrators of the stories. These stories were told *to us as subjects* and emerge out of our own interventions as well as narrators' reflections on the person they were talking to and the utility or otherwise of the research. This can contribute to a denaturalizing of research processes and a problematizing of academic subject positions in the study of labour's geography.

We conducted 76 oral history interviews in Peterborough in 2011 and 2012, 64 of which were life history interviews, 35 with women and 29 with men. Rogaly stayed in the city three days a week from March to December 2011. Qureshi lived there for three months during June to September. We undertook that participants would be sent the transcript of their interview for review and be able to make amendments to it before we sought permission to quote from it in our writings, playscript and website, and asked whether they would prefer the material anonymized for this purpose. Participants were also made aware that, if they were willing when consulted later in the process, the amended transcript would be deposited with the local library archives. 54 transcripts were deposited with Peterborough archives in 2014.

The narrators, who varied in age from seventeen to over ninety, had a range of occupations at the time of the interviews. Like each of the four people whose stories feature in the next section of this article, many of the narrators had once worked in food production, processing and/or packing in the 2000s, at least for a period. In the information sheet that we gave to participants, we presented the interviews as an opportunity to author and document their life histories, and highlighted experiences of work – alongside migration, place attachments and citizenship – as areas of key interest for the project. Apart from this introduction, we tried not to steer the participants to reflect on their experiences of work in any particular way. Nonetheless, we no doubt conveyed our interest in working

conditions to the participants through our presentation of our professional selves and previous academic work, as well as through the channels via which we came into contact with people, for example through recommendations by the Peterborough Racial Equality Council, who offer free legal advice to workers.

In the next section we draw in turn on the four selected narrators' life histories, focusing on their subjective portrayal of their work in the food sector as seen looking back from the time of the interviews in 2011 and 2012. Following the lead of others writing outside self-defined labour geography (see, for example, Walton-Roberts and Pratt, 2005; Walsh, 2006; Jackson and Russell, 2010; Lee and Pratt, 2011) we seek to elucidate insights from a very small number of telling cases, which need to be treated in sufficient depth to enable something of the individuality and diversity of the subjects to remain in the text (see also Battisti and Portelli, 1994; Shopes, 2011). We make reference to the inter-subjectivity both of the interviews and of other encounters with the same research participants. In the discussion that then follows we consider what the content of these stories, and the different modes of narrative, reveal about these participants' moral geographies and how all this together can contribute to a fuller understanding of labour's geography in the UK food sector and beyond.

#### 4. Four people at work in the Peterborough city region food sector

##### 4.1. Maria

At the time of Rogaly's first meeting with Maria, in October 2011, she was working in a skilled, technical role in a dairy produce factory in Peterborough. She was born in Poland in 1982 and grew up in a village near to Krakow, before going away to study for a diploma in food technology. Maria's parents had had a horticultural business but this had failed, and when she was fifteen her mother started travelling to Italy to work as a carer. Maria described her family as 'quite poor' at that time.

She reflected back on childhood work in her family's smallholding with some ambivalence. The memory of the smell of potatoes being harvested caused her to pause. Aware that part of our research agenda was to study working arrangements she also wanted to stress that, though hard, she did not feel the work she had done as a child in the family fields was exploitative:

Maria: ...let's say when I was nine years old I remember we had to go into the fields and we were [gathering in the hay] and picking the potatoes and I remember now this, I'm missing this very much because I like the smell of... not the compost but, not the earth, what is that when you're digging?

Ben: The earth to dig the potatoes?

Maria: Yeah.

Ben: And the smell of it.

Maria: Yes the smell of [the earth] and sometimes I'm going home and I say, 'Oh my God I love to go to the field and do some job' but they are laughing... because we know this is a really hard job and just... saying, 'Yes, yeah of course.' But it's nice to think about this... I'm all right with that what I was doing as a child. I don't feel like I was doing anything hard job like a slave or something like that at all.

In 2002 Maria and her mother used a labour-hiring agency to seek work in the UK. This had to be clandestine because it preceded Poland's accession to the EU in 2004. They were set up at a carrot-processing plant near Kings Lynn, thirty-five miles to the north-east of Peterborough on the other side of the Fens. Maria described it as one of the 'cold hells' that characterized her early experience in the UK:

There is a lot of cold hells in England, believe me <laughs> because mostly where you go in working here, it's just factories with the fruit or something so, I've got the problems with my fingers still now because I've got problems with circulation now...

Every aspect of life in the UK was arranged by the agency, from hiring to arranging accommodation, transport and linking them up with language schools, for which the agency levied charges that had to be repaid over a long period of time. Maria's narrative spoke both to that context and what she understood as Rogaly's interest in researching exploitative working conditions. Again, Maria took some control over how this was portrayed. Yes, the agency had power. It was 'like a net'. Yet she did not condemn them outright. She wanted to convey that she understood that these payments were a necessary price to get access to the British labour market at that time:

Yes so I think they've been very clever and always with a smile but nothing happened, nothing wrong happened to us... so I'm not going to say anything wrong about them because that was their business. If you want to work, come, but you have to pay.

While she partly longed for the horticultural work of her childhood, Maria actively sought to prevent her home village being portrayed as subsistence-based. Indeed, over a short time period the village itself had rapidly transformed away from self-provisioning food production. Maria chose 'Africa' as a metaphor for what her home place was not: 'it's like I think that maybe you can see us like people living in Africa, hunting and growing the vegetables.' She also saw her Polish home as precious, valuable to her and liable to be misunderstood and possibly misrepresented by Rogaly.

Maria experienced the sharp end of the reliance of labour-providing agencies on the vulnerability of undocumented workers. The velocity of her narrative (see [Portelli, 1991: 49](#)) slowed right down as she remembered the intense humiliation on being taken into custody and deported because she did not have permission to work in the UK.

They took me and put me with other people inside a big van. So I remember that and from that place I had sent some texts to people that they'd caught me, just be careful or something like that... they found a lot of tissues in my pockets, you know like from the tears and that. I remember that because they were laughing and maybe I was laughing at that time as well, but anyway, I spent that night in the cell which was terrible. The food they brought us was disgusting. I took a shower, they didn't let me change the clothes. I wear the same clothes. I was not stinking but really I felt dirty and humiliated.

Time speeded up again when Maria reconstructed her working life as a line worker in food-packing and processing plants both before her deportation and following her return in 2004. She spoke from the vantage point of her current job, where she no longer felt at the bottom of the pile, 'the worst' in an ethnicized hierarchy (see [Thiel, 2015](#) and below). Running through her narrative was a struggle for respect. Referring to her work in a fruit-packing factory in Yaxley, just outside Peterborough, Maria called it a 'terrible job':

For example in this place where I'm working now, a dairy factory, I can go to the toilet whenever I want... I don't know, it's like different world, when you are in a factory you are not allowed to speak too much or...

Polish people stayed on the line and were doing cutting grapes, picking fruits or checking, that stuff, sorting the fruits, and people who were the team leaders or supervisors were Pakistani people, because they could speak proper English. That was the only thing...

At one point Maria became ill, left the food factory work, became eligible for public housing, and was allocated a flat where she still lives. People working through agencies in food sector work in 2000s Peterborough had little choice of housing other than through informal private rental deals. Many of the landlords had Pakistani heritage ([Erel, 2011](#)). Maria reflected on the accommodation she had rented from Pakistani landlords in Peterborough in the past and what she concluded about Pakistanis as a group from this experience.

The adult people, they were all right with us... but I know a lot of Pakistani was using Polish people. They're still using those who are not speaking English... they're just trying to make money on us, that's the thing, and they haven't got... I think they haven't got respect for us... I would say that maybe English knows more about us than Pakistani because probably Pakistani doesn't bother, because they ask for example if we've got electricity in Poland or if we've got gas, or... they think that it's the third world where we live, like Africa. <Laughs>

Maria reflected on English people too, pitying them for what she saw as their loose morals, split families and selfishness. She wanted to 'talk mostly about the English because this topic is interesting for me as well and sometimes I feel like I'm doing on my own a little, what's that? Like research.'

#### 4.2. Matt

Matt was working in a menswear shop in the centre of Peterborough when Rogaly met him in 2011. He was born in Kłodzko in western Poland in 1978, moving for three years as a child to live with his maternal grandparents in a poor rural part of east central Poland. This was a formative period for Matt. Like Maria, he idealized aspects of that life in spite of its poverty. He also began to reveal a strong sense of morality regarding interpersonal conduct that later emerged in the context of remembering his contrasting experiences of food sector workplaces.

[People in the village] would pop in to get some water from our well and the well was quite deep and the water was very cold, and very fresh and really refreshing, revitalizing, it was fantastic. And people had time for each other and they talked to each other and they helped each other. If you were passing and there were people working out in the field you would greet them, they'd have responded, perhaps you'd have a little chat with them – people were much closer [...]

Matt was also seemingly conscious of our interest in work-place relations and near the start of his narrative he volunteered information about the forced labour undertaken by both his grandfathers during the second world war. By contrast, when Matt thought back to the first strawberry farm he had worked on in Suffolk in 2001 as a student through the Seasonal Agricultural Workers' Scheme (SAWS) he remembered this first visit in very benign terms.

We weren't rushing around like blue-arsed flies so there was chat and it was quite relaxing and really good.

Matt was surprised when, having arrived on a Saturday, the group of workers were told there would be no work on the Sunday and also offered a lift to church, should they wish to go. The farm manager was technically astute and had been able to invest sufficiently to have all the strawberries in tunnels with raised beds so that there 'was no bending, there was no picking on your knees.' And he encouraged Matt, an opera buff – who had written reviews

for the Poznan Opera House magazine and collected the autographs of a number of famous stars – to visit London to see Pavarotti perform in Hyde Park.<sup>8</sup>

Matt's second stint on a strawberry farm at the beginning of the 2002 brought him to the Fens. This was a large farm made up of rented holdings crossing a wide area, and required a much more demanding daily routine:

The work was much harder. . . We were coming seven o'clock, spot on, we were on the fields, so obviously we had to get up earlier and get on the vans earlier to be there for seven o'clock but also the farm was quite huge. He was one of the major producers of strawberries.

Moreover, the workers were paid per punnet of strawberries rather than per hour, as Matt had been on the Suffolk farm. The bending, and possibly the fast pace required, meant that he 'had a period of about ten days... where I literally couldn't feel one of my legs.' The piecework had meant pressure to work harder and faster and had not suited Matt. He interpreted the responses of different workers to the incentive element of piece rates as reflecting the relative poverty of the countries from which they had come, picking up a frequent tendency of the narrators to use national stereotypes:

[The piece work was] not so great for myself because I was never a great picker. I wasn't the worst but I felt a bit depressed, we always looked at the Russians and Lithuanians and Ukrainians, you could just see chi, chi, chi, chi in those strawberry bushes, you know <laughs> and leaves flying in all directions! [...] It was widely known between us, the Poles and the Czechs, that they were from the poor country and they were absolutely desperate for money and their standard of life was nowhere near ours. Even if you looked at the pictures, they brought the pictures of their family and you looked at people's clothes, at the furniture where it was taken, you could tell, they wanted money much more than ourselves.

Matt talked of his third strawberry-picking experience in resoundingly negative terms, as a transformation that lifted the scales from his eyes about the whole set up for food supply chain workers in the UK: 'that farm was a disaster and that's where my perception of it all was shattered.' He described an incident in which the farm manager asked the workers to pick a field that had become flooded because her dogs, 'the little awful beasts,' were biting the irrigation tapes. This eventually led to a minor rebellion:

She would say, 'you need to pick the rest of the field,' and we said, 'there is NO rest of the field, it's all dead plants there because of your dogs – there's no pressure in the pipes, it's all leaked out in here, that's why it's muddy and you've got the lake.' 'No, you've got to pick it.' And we *didn't*, it was like a rebellion and she was threatening that she would get rid of all of us and get some other students. And we were like, 'Well, you try it.' So she didn't, but we would literally start work at eight o'clock, finishing at two o'clock and the money was peanuts.

By the time Matt came back to England in May 2004 Poland had acceded to the European Union (EU) and he was therefore an EU national rather than a student on the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Scheme.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, his first job was back on the strawberry

farm in the Fens. In September the same year he moved to work in a fruit salad factory in Wisbech. He described what he experienced as a corrupt workplace regime at the factory. Part of this was to do with hygiene. According to Matt, fruit salads were even assembled from the dustbin waste:

All this fruit, plastic, plastic foil, labels, whatnot, all the rubbish, anything swept from the floor... And they're getting the fruit out of it to make the salads. Did that make your day?

Matt's role was Line Recorder. He would set the machines for particular fruit, set the use-by date and give the line workers the signal to start. Senior to him was a team leader, reporting to a manager. The team leaders did very little themselves.

They were holy cows who were there, hands in their pockets, enjoying themselves, chat, ha ha ha, planning next Friday night or discussing the previous one, how drunk they were etc and that was it.

Matt described separate seating practices in the canteen and the sense that anyone in a management position had of being higher up, of more value. The hierarchy was ethnically marked. 'There was plenty of contempt,' he said, 'even Portuguese were kind of... a few positions ahead of us.'

When Matt left the factory job and moved to Peterborough to seek work, one of his first ports of call was a high-street office temping agency. Here he experienced direct racism. He wanted Rogaly to 'name and shame' the agency:

She said, 'People will be put off when you introduce yourself over the phone so may I suggest that you change your name and surname into something more English-like?' I said, 'Would you have the courage to say it to any of the Asians?' and I just walked off... I found that absolutely shocking, appalling and I never, ever went anywhere near them.

#### 4.3. Ana Rosa and Randy

Ana Rosa was a part-time sales representative for a beauty product firm when Qureshi met with her and Randy, her husband, in July 2011. She was born in 1977 in Portugal and by July 2011 had lived in Peterborough for over a decade. As a child, Ana Rosa's mother had worked in a clothes factory, whilst her father migrated to Switzerland. In 1997, her parents were recruited by an agency in Peterborough that contracted workers for food sector pack houses. Although they were EU nationals, their unfamiliarity with England and limited spoken English made them just as reliant on unscrupulous agents as Maria:

That agency used to bring a lot of people to the UK to work for them, but when they get here they used to work, work, work and never see a single penny. Loads of Portuguese were through the agency and they all started running away because they used to hurt them if they're not going to work.

Ana Rosa arrived in Peterborough in 1999 to join the same agency as her parents, as 'that was the only company we knew.' Seemingly responding to Qureshi's interest in working conditions, Ana Rosa detailed the routines maintained by the agency. They woke at 3.30 am in order to be ready to walk down to the pick-up point on Lincoln Road by 5 am. The agency minibus picked them up at 5 am and drove out through small winding roads, past deep rivers that frightened Ana Rosa in the dark, to the factory in the Fens near Ely, 24 miles south-east of Peterborough. They assembled ready to start work at 6 am and then worked through to 8 pm. From 6 am to 7 pm they stood at a conveyor belt, eight

<sup>8</sup> Matt was disappointed that he had not been able to follow what had once promised to be a musical career of his own, and preferred to emphasize his love for opera over his work in agriculture in the quote he chose to accompany his portrait photograph, see <http://www.placesforall.co.uk/portfolio/mateusz-tarnawski/>.

<sup>9</sup> It was very difficult in practice for students on the SAWS scheme to change employers, though in theory they were permitted to within the scheme (Simpson, 2011).



people to a side, packing mixed peppers and broccoli. At 7 pm the packing stopped and the workers cleaned the entire premises, including the toilets, which Ana Rosa described with disgust.

The questions that Qureshi asked of Ana Rosa made her 'conversational narrative' – produced through the interviewer's particular follow-ups and responses (Grele, 1989, cited by James, 2000: 135) dwell on the poor conditions in which she'd worked. The job was exhausting and ill paid: in 1999 Ana Rosa earned £150 for working 16 hours a day, seven days a week. But what Ana Rosa really wanted to talk about was the relationships she made on shop floor. She remembered making friends with an English woman who was working as a supervisor. Ana Rosa taught her Portuguese – in exchange for English – to help her to flirt with one of the other vegetable-packers:

I started telling her jokes, funny words, and she used to go to the boy and said to him, 'you're an idiot,' in Portuguese, and the boy started liking her, and joking with her and everything. I think they were friendly with us; I really enjoyed spending time with them. And when I used to go for cleaning the canteen, she used to come running, 'I'm coming to help you!' She wasn't allowed because she was part of the management, but she used to ask all the time, if I need her help.

Two months into her time at the factory in Ely, Ana Rosa was incapacitated for a year because of a horrific road accident on the way back to Peterborough. This was a major event in her life, one that had left her with scars all over her body. The minibus belonged to the agency and was full of Portuguese workers from the packing factory. It was winding its way past the small town of Ramsey at 8 pm when it collided with a car that was coming the other way. Sitting in a seat with a faulty seatbelt, Ana Rosa was catapulted through the front window. She remembered, in an ironic tone, that the owner of the agency had sent her a bouquet of flowers after the accident. Meanwhile, she was paid nothing during her recovery as it turned out that the minibus was not insured and she was not covered for statutory sick pay.

When I got back to work I had a big bouquet of flowers on the table for me, and he came, shook my hand, 'oh, how is your face? How are your stitches?' But he never talked about paying my money that I lost for all that time because it wasn't my fault.

When she returned to work, Ana Rosa found another agency and began to work at a fruit-packing factory near Huntingdon, 24 miles south of Peterborough. She worked at that factory for over a year and was made a company employee. It was there she met Randy, whom she was later to marry. At this point in the interview Ana Rosa, and later Randy, took control of the conversation and reestablished 'narrative as such' (Grele, 1989, cited by James, 2000: p135) – the narrative the narrator wants to tell – by telling embellished stories about their first encounter.

Randy was born in Sylhet town in Bangladesh in 1976 and moved to England in 1982 after the death of his father, to join his father's brother in Rochdale. Randy left school at 15 to enter the uncle's 'curry house', as he put it, and for the next ten years, he moved between different curry houses across England owned by his relatives. When he recalled how he had finally left the restaurant industry, his face lit up with pleasure. His first job was in a chocolate factory in Corby, where he worked with

Polish people, Bengali people, English people, Jamaicans, different people. And you get to make a conversation with them, 'How's life back home?' Different countries; different languages; different religion and things... because as you're working, you can talk whereas in the restaurant, you are taking orders, 'Yes, sir, yes sir...' and you take it in the kitchen, come back in, you're not talking to no one.

His next job was as a recruiter for an agency in Thrapston. His job was to drive agency workers to packing factories. Filling in for the agency as a supervisor at the fruit-packing factory near Huntingdon, he met Ana Rosa working on the oranges line with her parents. Telling Qureshi about their first meeting, Randy slipped into a reverie. It all started with his ambivalence about his role as a supervisor, and feeling like he wanted to join in with the agency workers:

I put my clipboard to one side my pen and everything, start working the line and just talking to the people, and they're thinking 'Why is he working with us?' But because I was bored, I didn't know, I was talking, no problem. And then I see Ana Rosa, I don't want to like ... scared, not talking, she was very quiet, you know. I think I just chat her up. <Laughter> [...] I picked up a moldy orange, chucked it at her, it went all over her! <Laughter> She looked at me. I said, 'I'm sorry, bad orange, bad orange.' And then she wanted to say something but she couldn't, kept looking and smirking, seems really interested. If you have someone else, they'd probably throw it back at me, start up a bit of fun. So I'm working, working, had a bad apple as well, so I chucked it at her, everybody you see gets a bit mucky, greeny and flakey powder was all over her uniform.

Ana Rosa left the factory when they had children. Randy moved between various jobs in the food sector eventually securing an agency position at Perkins Engines,<sup>10</sup> the pinnacle of his working life, turning him into a breadwinner with a family wage. However, by the summer of 2011, when Qureshi was meeting with them, Randy had been dismissed from Perkins because of an alleged racially-aggravated dispute with a Pakistani colleague. Randy and Ana Rosa's experiences of extreme exploitation by agencies in the food sector made them determined to appeal against the agency. This was despite the agency warning Randy that even if he did win the appeal, he would not get his Perkins job back. Possibly, they might give him a job near one of the Fen towns such as Spalding, Wisbech or March, but Randy said he did not want that. 'Where we live, in Parnwell, Perkins is only five minutes away from our house.' He was no longer willing to put up with that life. He and Ana Rosa, showing the same tendency to draw on national stereotypes, alleged ethnic favoritism on behalf of the Polish agency staff.

## 5. Discussion

The large-scale survey-based studies of UK food sector employment in the 2000s reviewed earlier (e.g. Scott et al., 2012) provided clear evidence of exploitation, and racialized and ethnicized power hierarchies. Such experiences are tangible in these extracts from interviews with four oral history narrators. However, the oral history interviews also offer glimpses into transformational change in contexts of ongoing struggles for dignity and recognition. They respond directly to Castree's (2010: 468–9) call for more attention in labour geography to workers' moral geographies, to their sets of values relating to modes of conduct towards other people at particular times and places. The extracts focus on the geography of food sector employment in the Peterborough city region and on conduct in spaces including the factory line, the horticultural field, and associated spaces of worker transport, informally-contracted private rental accommodation, and, in Maria's case, the spaces of detention in a police vehicle and cell.

Workers' moral geographies are seen to be context specific, complex and diverse (Rouverol and Chatterley, 2000: 67; Gough,

<sup>10</sup> Perkins Engines, established in 1932, is the single largest employer in Peterborough, and at its heydays in the 1970s employed 10,000 workers at its Eastfield site. At the end of 1997 Perkins Engines was acquired by Caterpillar Inc.



2010: 133). While Matt objected to the ethnicized hierarchy he remembered in the space of the fruit salad factory at Wisbech between 2004 and 2007, Ana Rosa and Randy portrayed relations in a Huntingdon fruit-packing factory as enjoyably cosmopolitan, at least much of the time. Randy's moral worldview built on the food factory line as a space of relative freedom when contrasted with the tightly constrained workspaces he had experienced in his uncles' curry houses. Indeed, he and Ana Rosa's relationship began as a flirtation on the factory floor and this, rather than harsh working conditions, was what they both *chose* to emphasize in narrating their work in fruit-packing.

All the narrators appreciated workplaces where talking or chatting was not penalized. Randy valued the conversation that he could have on the factory floor, something which ran completely against the culture narrated by another research participant, Nina, at a potato-grading and packing plant she described as like a 'war camp,' where people were prohibited from speaking and kept their heads bowed. Connecting with his earlier childhood memory of people having time for each other in his grandparents' village, Matt spoke highly of the first strawberry farm he worked on in England: 'we weren't rushing around like blue-arsed flies so there was chat and it was quite relaxing and really good.' Read out of context this statement could be mistaken for the words of a lazy person. Far from it. Indeed Matt's moral view, sometimes expressed forthrightly, saw good in people pulling their weight at work. He expressed anger in remembering the 'corruption' of a 'clique' of team leaders at the Wisbech fruit salad factor whom he saw as having been parasitic on others.

Oral history here is also suggestive of workers' moral geographies beyond food sector spaces, including in the space of academic research projects. Interviews are notoriously artificial, yet as oral historians have argued they are also opportunities for shared authority (Frisch, 1990) through which the narrators make a pedagogical contribution (Miles and Crush, 1993: 87 and 89; Gray, 2014). While Matt took some pride in this and great care over the corrections to his transcript, Maria questioned the morality of research itself. Could it have any effect on grossly unequal power relations in contemporary capitalism? Was it more attuned to the career advancement of the researchers than any more progressive agenda? These questions allude to the relation between academic and non-academic worlds which geographer Mia Gray (2014) discusses in some detail. Such reflexivity is rare in self-defined labour geography, but characteristic of much oral history literature.

An oral history approach further enabled sensitivity towards narrators' views on how their experiences might be represented through the research. Maria was cautious and thoughtful about the image of her past and current life that might be coming across in the interview. She did not want to be seen as a slave, as primitive or a victim of exploitation. Reflecting another scale of moral geography, she recoiled at the thought her story might be associated with 'Africa'. Maria's framings of 'Africa' make uncomfortable reading, as does her acceptance of ethno-national stereotypes. While 'social discrimination in jobs has sometimes been supported by capital as a means of super-exploiting the excluded group' (Gough, 2010: 132; Urzi, 2015, shows this at work through discrimination by immigration status in Italian agriculture), ethnic stereotyping by workers functions in these extracts as a methodological check on any tendency to romanticize workers' moral geographies of food sector workplaces.

The narrators teach others how labour processes played out in particular times and spaces and in the context of workers' whole lives. The material is 'temporally integrated' (Kwan, 2013), reflecting the 'erratic times' that our paths crossed as well as the historical times being remembered. The research participants spoke from the vantage point of a lifetime of experience including

family histories. Matt and another participant, Nina, talked about their experience of migration and food sector work within family memories of forced labour and war camps – as well as childhood memories. Maria and Matt's moral geographies were expressed partly through the idiom of a home place. This is not simply nostalgic. Poverty, conflict and hardship are evident in both stories. However, nostalgia, when it does occur should not simply be dismissed. It can have its uses in articulating challenges to contemporary injustices (see Jones, 2012: 128–130) and in taking ownership of one's story.

The telling of oral history enables these narrators to reclaim personhood, to be more than merely 'workers' in a study of the food sector. It conveys subjective experiences of food sector employment in the 2000s, from the vantage point of a specific present. Yet, in none of the four cases is this present narrated simply as a comfortable time of escape following heroic resistance. Each narrative conveys something of how the passing of time and the speaker's lived experience had shifted both their view on the morality of food sector workplaces, and their capacity to stand up to exploitation. Randy's fight for the permanent position at Perkins engineering that he saw as rightfully his expressed a weary familiarity with the outlying work locations in the city region's labour market. He saw it as unjust that he would have to go back to agency working at all, and certainly if it involved having to work in the Fens. His position on this was also shaped by his changing life trajectory, now that he was part of a family with three young children (see Strauss and Meehan, 2015). Randy was not alone among the four narrators in continuing to struggle after leaving more exploitative food sector work. Matt verbally challenged and walked out of the high street employment agency in Peterborough that would not put him on their books unless he changed his name. This too was immoral in his view, because it discriminated against him for having a foreign-sounding name. Yet, in contrast, he remembered his first UK workplace, the first of three strawberry farms he worked on, as entirely benign. It was the third strawberry farm where his 'perception of it all was shattered.'

## 6. Conclusion

On returning to Peterborough in summer 2013, Rogaly met up with Maria, who had read through the draft of her case study in this article and commented that Peterborough now felt more her home than the Polish village she had grown up in. Time passes and subjective experiences are seen in a different light. Oral history can enable not only an approach to labour geography that takes workers' moral geographies seriously, but one which is more aware of the changing lives and consciousness of the people involved.

The tenets of self-defined labour geography<sup>11</sup> reiterated recently by Herod (2014) continue to generate important questions for research even in an era where the relative power of labour in relation to capital in the global north has declined in the face of the growth of 'precarious and casual contracts, self-employment and low-paid work with little security and poor conditions' (McDowell and Christopherson, 2009: 336) and ever-expanding sub-contracting (Wills et al., 2010). Indeed such conditions have long been prevalent in labour-intensive horticulture (Rogaly, 2008) and in food packing and processing work, where conventional unionization has often been absent or patchy (with important exceptions, see, for example, Jenkins and Perrow, 1977; Mitchell, 2012). These conditions call for creative innovation in labour organizing (see Wills et al., 2009 for a relatively successful example outside the food sector) and greater scholarly attention by labour geographers to un-organized labour, to non-industrial sectors and to the complexity of agency, an agenda

<sup>11</sup> Active agency of workers, contestation between workers and capitalists, and heterogeneity within those 'classes'.

that fits well with labour geography 2.0 as identified by Herod (2014) – although he does not specify the need to include a focus on the agency of individual workers, which we have explored here (see also Rogaly, 2009; Carswell and de Neve, 2013; Axelsson et al., 2017).<sup>12</sup>

To refer back to Castree's (2010) argument, with which we began: labour geographers would do well to take more account of how individual people's workplace and other past experiences produce moral geographies. This article has shown that serious engagement with oral history can have an important role to play here. It has revealed contempt for corruption among an ethnicized labour aristocracy, disgust at exploitative conditions, the potential for small, meaningful acts of agency, humour in the re-telling of past events, and a valuing of convivial workplace cultures. Moreover, oral history is about more than merely the creation of knowledge. As in the larger project from which this article draws, it can also be about collaborating with non-academic research participants to contribute to social change (Rogaly, 2016).

At the same time we have remained attuned in this article to the unequal power relations between academic researchers and the non-academic people that they work with. The long tradition in oral history of analyzing such relations can be of use to a more activist labour geography. Oral historians such as Kerr (2003) and Rouverol (2005) have shown how engaging with individual agency in the narratives of people experiencing oppression or exploitation can lead to individual transformation for both researcher and participant, and indeed can go further and lead to collective organization and resistance.

Recognition of contingent selves with multiple subject positions should not 'lead to abandoning the site of class politics or to claiming that class is politically irrelevant' (Mann, 2007: 154). Engaging with the subjective experiences of working in the food sector strengthens the vital work geographers and others are doing to reveal and respond to harsh workplace regimes, the telling being an agentic act in itself, and knowledge of how workers experience such regimes becomes fuller and more rounded. However, in contrast to the practice of most labour geographers, our emphasis on individual ways of telling means people, once – perhaps still – food sector employees, emerge *as people*, rather than being reduced to a category that may only have relevance for a temporary period of their adult lives.

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<sup>12</sup> Indeed, our emphasis here on individual agency contributes to a labour geography literature inspired by Herod that has been 'marked by a defining concern with labor as a collective political actor' (Peck, accepted for publication, emphasis added).

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